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ABSTRACT

Noting that efforts at restraining rock music may be quite limiting to the free expression of artists and the reception of the music by individuals who strongly value their musical experiences, a study investigated the uses of rock music by young adults and its effect on them. Subjects, 128 college students, indicated on a self-report survey (1) the frequency with which they listened to rock music on radio, albums, and tapes; (2) how much attention they pay to rock music lyrics and how much effort they exert in trying to memorize the lyrics of favorite artists; (3) how often they listen to rock music while drinking alcohol, using drugs, or engaging in sex; and (4) whether they agreed or disagreed with a number of attitudinal items. Respondents were also queried using several items as to their knowledge of some specific rock lyrics and artists. The results challenge claims of many rock critics. Subjects seemed generally aware of sexual explicitness in rock and roll, with at least 40% agreeing it is a common occurrence. The respondents indicated some personal offense by these lyrics, with over half believing that children are adversely affected by sexual messages, and nearly one third supporting the call for warning labels on albums and tapes with explicit lyrics. Respondents listened to rock music much less than the five hours each day that critics claim, and knowledge of some common rock lyrics was lacking. Results indicated that neither exposure over time nor attention to lyrics is a significant predictor of the belief that sex is enhanced by listening to rock music. The results suggest that focusing on the lyrics, apart from the music, may not be the most appropriate way to examine alleged effects. (HTH)

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The Uses of and Attention to Rock's Lurid Lyrics

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Abstract

College students were surveyed about their attitudes and uses of rock music. The assumptions of critics of this music, who are calling for regulation, are examined. A test of the incremental influence of various motivational and cognitive variables, above and beyond exposure to rock music, predicts the belief that using rock music enhances sexual experiences. Using this music because it "helps bring out one's personality" is shown to predict the belief sex is enhanced by rock music listening. Neither exposure nor active, or "mindful," listening to rock lyrics is found to contribute to this belief.

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Vexation about rock music lyrics and video images has recently occupied members of the United States Senate and their spouses, parents of teenagers and state legislators. Perhaps confusing pornography, obscenity and indecency, concerned individuals and groups have encouraged regulation of the rock music industry.

The ears of these rock "critics" frequently focus on allegedly obscene lyrics--words that are protected by the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment despite their ability to offend, unless they are part of material found to be obscene. Content is obscene if in total it appeals to the prurient interest of the average person, using contemporary community standards; depicts or describes sexual conduct that is patently offensive; and as a whole is lacking in serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value (c.f., Miller vs. California, 1973; FCC vs. Pacifica Foundation, 1978).

Legal and public discourse about controlling rock music lyrics frequently embodies one common assumption relative to sexual content--the messages are inherently harmful.

However, efforts at restraining rock music may be quite limiting to the free expression of artists and the reception of the music by individuals who strongly value such involvement as a daily experience with the radio, television, and tape player.

This paper addresses the uses of rock and roll music by young adults, many who find this cultural phenomenon intrinsic to daily life. This group's use of rock music will be investigated, with particular emphasis on some of the charges recently brought forth by critics calling for regulation.

Buried within the text of the arguments for control lies a layer

of assumptions about what listeners do with rock music and rock music's effects on individuals and society. The National Parent-Teachers Association is concerned with explicit sexual lyrics that allegedly are contributing to an increase in rape, suicide and sadomasochism in society (The Washington Post, 1985). This group does not specify whether all persons, or if only ill and criminal individuals, exposed to rock music engage in such gruesome behavior. The Parents Music Resource Center, also principally concerned with offensive lyrics, claims that teenagers innocently go shopping for albums and "get more than they bargained for" (The Washington Post, 1985). Implicit in this argument is that the listeners attend to the lyrics, i.e., they exert mental effort, cognitively focus on the words and phrases, store that information in some form of memory, and most likely recall or recognize those lyrics at some later time.

The critics also maintain that teenagers listen to rock music an average of five hours a day and are "saturated" with indecent messages of "mankind at its most base" (Christian Science Monitor, 1985). Many radio stations do not broadcast recordings targeted by the concerned groups. Some stations refused to play "Erotic City," by rock artist Prince, despite continual requests during the record's stint at the top of record charts, with over 10 million copies sold (Washington Times, 1985).

It seems that at the same time young people are allegedly mindlessly taking in massive doses of unanticipated gross messges, they are believed to be paying attention to sometimes buried single words or passages that are found to offend the most perceptive ear. In addition, it is assumed that the words themselves, not the music,

are doing damage.

Inquiry into how youths use and are affected by rock music has shown aficionados are unable to relate the general message of a song's lyrics (Hirsch, 1971). Higher levels of emotion, excitement and openness are associated with music listening over television viewing (Larson and Kubey, 1983). In addition, listening to the radio is much more likely to occur for young adults than watching television (Avery, 1979). Thus, the concern by rock music critics with sexual or violent music video images of a visual nature may be better centered on the more important aural experiences.

Research studies to date have occurred in a couple of waves. The sixties was a time when the public agenda included an interest in the political messages of rock music, as well as a concern for sexual content, given the perceived raunchy origins of the musical form. At this time, researchers examined content analyses of sexual and political messages (c.f., Cole, 1971), as well as the popular cultural aspects of courting and romancing (Carey, 1969; Horton, 1957). More recent concerns have been toward music video, with an added interest in violent and sexual/violent themes, but also a focus on the possible usefulness of music in the socialization process (Lull, 1985).

This study attempts to address some of the claims by recent advocates of rock music regulation, specifically that rock music's lyrics corrupt attitudes and behavior.

Theoretically, it is useful to study a social-structural group, young adults, who use rock and roll in a highly specialized manner, compared to the general population. Blumler (1984) has suggested researchers study media uses and gratifications that are more socially

relevant and specific to particular media--genres, episodes, editions. Rather than investigating a homogeneous audience's use of general television, or radio, for example, the more heterogeneous usage of specialized content is recommended. Blumler argues that the shared social roles general media offer are quite universal, such as family membership and citizenship, but much more relevant roles are available to specialized media users who seek certain needs of a "community with its own rites, standards, pecking orders, models of excellence, leaders of fashion...." (1984) Rock music users neatly fit this description of a specialized media group. Blumler adds that audience members' roles within certain social contexts should be studied relative to these specialized media, e.g., whether individuals are active or passive when confronting a medium as a fan, expert, explorer, escapee, etc. (1984).

A specific look at how actively young adults consume rock and roll, with some questions regarding the notion of "mindful," or active listening will be explored. As Lull (1985) has argued, an active use of the medium of rock music may increase its effect as an agent of socialization. Lull maintains that at the cognitive level, attending to the music leads to the desire to socialize, dance and speak in the contemporary codes of the genre, in addition to using it as a constant backdrop for other behaviors.

This study examines whether attitudes about using rock and roll as a backdrop for such behaviors as drinking, drug usage and sexual activities are a function of indulgence in such behaviors (perhaps experimentally), exposure to music that lyrically concentrates on such behavior, and acute attention to lyrics or exertion of effort to learn

them.

Method

A sample of 128 college students from three required undergraduate courses at Cleveland State University was surveyed. In an effort to obtain a cross-section of the university population, the sampling included one evening and two day courses. The questionnaire, a self-report instrument, began with a general disclaimer, discouraging those who might be offended from participating. The response rate was 83 percent.

Students reported the frequency of listening to rock music on radio, albums and tapes, in number of hours per day. They indicated how much attention they pay to rock music lyrics and how much effort they exert in trying to memorize the lyrics of favorite musical artists, using four response categories that ranged from a lot to none. The level of agreement, or disagreement, with a number of attitudinal items was ascertained, using a five-point Likert scale (ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree). These were: "Most rock music contains sexually explicit lyrics," "I am offended by sexually explicit lyrics in music," "Sexually explicit lyrics have a negative effect on children," and "Albums/tapes that contain sexually explicit lyrics should have warning labels on them." Three "gratifications sought," or reasons for using rock music, items were included, using the same Likert scale. These items, traditional and unique to this study, are as follows: "I use music as a personal escape," "Music gives me something to talk about with my friends," and "I use music to help bring out my personality."

Respondents were asked whether they frequently, sometimes, rarely

or never listen to rock music while engaging in the behaviors of drinking alcoholic beverages, drug usage and sex.

In addition to self-reports of age and education the respondents were queried using several items as to their knowledge of some specific rock lyrics and artists.

Three pretests on an additional 60 students were necessary in order to arrive at knowledge questions. The items used for the final instrument included two sets of lyrics that contained the name of the song in each stanza, a cut from Bruce Springsteen's "Pink Cadillac," and Prince's "Erotic City." Students were asked to name the song title and the artist.

A recall item was included to ascertain knowledge of a popular John Cougar Mellencamp song, "Hurt So Good." The passage presented did not include the title of the song, and the respondent was asked to complete the stanza by filling in the blank at the end of the passage. The "correct" answer was actually the song's title, repeated 12 times on the recording.

Respondents were asked in an open-ended fashion what, if anything offended them about the above "knowledge" passages and what, if anything, they find offensive in rock music lyrics.

The dependent variables, attitudes that rock music enhances sexual encounters and intensifies the effects of alcohol and drugs, were asked, using the same Likert scale.

In the analysis, a description of the sample's behaviors and attitudes is of principal concern. However, the hypothesis tested is that active listening, knowledge of rock music, and use of rock music with specific behaviors were expected to increase the effect of

exposure in acccunting for variation in the dependent variables: the belief that rock music enhances sexual encounters and the belief that rock music enhances the effects of alcohol and drugs.

Results

Based on the univariate analysis, this sample was quite representative on the following demographic characteristics that closely matched university data: Fifty-two percent are female, 46 percent are male; 79 percent are white, with 10 percent black and the remaining members of others racial/ethnic groups; age and educational level suggests a bias toward younger, freshmen students, with 43 percent freshmen, 18 percent sophomores, 19 percent juniors and 9 percent seniors. Age categories reflected a similar distribution, with categories ranging from 18 to 35.

The mean for radio listening was 3 hours a day, with listening to records and tapes 2.17.

Regarding active listening, 4 percent of the sample reported they exert no attention to rock's messages, 13 percent reported a little attention is exerted, 51 percent indicated they pay some attention and 22 percent reported they pay a lot of attention. About 22 percent responded that they never exert effort to memorize the lyrics of favorite artists, 40 percent reported doing this a little, 28 percent some and 11 percent a lot.

Forty percent of the students agreed that most rock music contains explicit sexual references and 21 percent indicated they are offended by rock and roll lyrics that are explicitly sexual.

About 56 percent agreed such explicitness has a negative effect on children. Also, 35 percent agreed that warning labels should be

included on rock music packaging.

Only 34 percent accurately identified the Springsteen lyrics and authorship, with 45 percent correctly recognizing the Erotic City title and 43 percent correctly identifying Prince as the artist.

Finally, 9 percent of the students indicated they could not complete the John Cougar Mellencamp passage, with 6 percent completing it inaccurately, 16 percent correctly listing the redundant phrase, "Hurt So Good," and 66 percent not responding.

Compiling the knowledge items into an additive index yielded a Chronbach's alpha coefficient of .85, but with only 33 respondents across these items, not enough to include in the multivariate analyses of these data. Missing responses could be interpreted as lack of knowledge, because most cases occurred in the middle of fully completed questionnaires.

When asked open-endedly what, if anything, most offends them in rock music, about 15 percent responded sexual content, 6 percent indicated anti-religious messages, 5 percent reported devil worship, 4 percent responded messages degrading women, 3 percent reported drug usage and 1 percent masochism. Ten percent indicated nothing was offensive, and the remaining surveys were left blank.

A look at the bivariate correlations of the critical variables in this study was revealing. Listening to rock music on the radio was inversely correlated with the attitude that sexually explicit lyrics have a negative effect on children (-.18, $p < .05$), that albums and tapes should contain warning labels (-.20, $p < .05$), and directly related to the frequency of drinking while listening to rock music (.20, $p < .05$). Listening to rock music on lps and tapes was related

to engaging in drug intake while listening to rock music (.28, p< .01), and age (.33, p< .001).

Being offended by sexually explicit lyrics in music correlated with the belief that such lyrics have a negative effect cn children (.43, p< .001), on people in general (.52, p< .001), and that warnings should be included on lp/tape covers (.53, p<.001), in addition to the gratification of seeking escape with rock music (-.21, p< .01) and attention to rock music (.17, p< .05). Being offended in this manner was negatively correlated with taking drugs while listening to music (-.44, p< .001), and drinking while listening to rock (-.32, p< .001).

The gratification item of escape was also related inversely to the belief that sexually explicit lyrics have a negative effect on children (-.16, p< .05). Seeking escape was related to the gratification item of using music in order to talk about it with others (.19, p< .05) and that using music helps bring out one's personality (.44, p< .001).

A more specific look at the correlations of variables used in the causal model (See Table 1.) is revealing. Age is the only social structural variable correlated with a dependent variable, in this case, the attitude that rock music enhances the sexual experience. Older persons are more likely to hold this belief, with a correlation of .25 (p< .001). Exposure to records and tapes is correlated with the attitude that rock music enhances experiences with drugs and alcohol, correlated .27 (p< .05).

Engaging in sexual behavior while listening to rock music is correlated with the belief rock music enhances the sexual experience (.37, p< .001) and that rock music intensifies the effects of alcohol

and drugs (.24, p< .01). Seeking something to talk about with friends is correlated with believing sexual encounters are better with rock music (.12, p< .10); and using rock music to bring out one's personality is correlated with believing sexual encounters and drug/alcohol experiences are enhanced with rock music (.16, p< .05 and .19, p< .05, respectively).

The multivariate model that was tested employed the predictor and dependent variables presented in Table 1. Hierarchical regression analysis was employed, with various blocks related to the uses of rock music following an exposure block. In chronological order of causality, the first block included age and gender, used as controls. The second block was exposure, listening to rock on the radio, to records and tapes. The third block included the behavior of consuming rock music while indulging in either sex, or drugs/alcohol (depending on which dependent variable was tested). Next, gratification sought, or reason for listening, was entered. This reason for using rock music, regarded as a contingent condition of exposure, was entered as a main effect in this block (and later as an interactive vector with exposure). Next, the active listening block of attention to rock lyrics and expending energy to memorize those lyrics was added. Finally the block of interaction variables, gratification sought multiplied by exposure to albums and the radio, was included, to make the model hierarchically complete.

Testing the predictors on the dependent variable of believing listening to rock music while indulging in drugs intensifies the drug experience in general resulted in no significant findings. However, the dependent variable of believing rock music enhances sexual

encounters proved successful (see Table 2.).

Neither the demographic block of age and gender nor the exposure block significantly accounted for variation in this belief rock music enhances sexual encounters, although age had a significant beta of .22 in each run. This means older persons were more likely to agree that sexual encounters are enhanced by rock listening.

By adding engaging in sex while listening to rock, a significant R-square increase occurred (.11, $p < .001$), increasing the overall variation accounted for to 18 percent. Engaging in sex while listening to rock music predicted the belief music enhances the sexual experience .33 ($p < .001$).

The next block included the only gratification item correlated with this dependent variable--bringing out one's personality. Entering this variable as a block showed yet another addition in the R-square (4 percent, $p < .05$), leading to an R-square of 21 percent. A beta of .19 ($p < .05$) indicated a positive linear relationship between this gratification item and the dependent variable.

The inclusion of the active listening block showed only a minor increase in variation. Finally, because the interaction of gratification sought and exposure was not significant, this block was omitted from the model. Age as an individual predictor held up through the entire model.

Discussion

The descriptive data challenge the claims of many rock and roll critics. First, the students surveyed seem generally aware of sexual explicitness in rock and roll, with at least over 40 percent agreeing it is a common occurrence. Although no formal content analysis

accompanied this study, a qualitative examination of popular rock music revealed ubiquitous sexual references and themes. The respondents in this study indicated some personal offense by these lyrics, over half believing that children are aversely affected by sexual messages, and nearly one-third supporting the call for warning labels.

It appears many of the students, who critics believe to be the unexpected targets of the dangerous content of rock and roll lyrics, anticipate lurid content and tend to agree with the criticism relative to their offensiveness.

Claims that young people listen to an average of 5 hours of rock music daily is in question, as only 3 percent of the sample reported listening to records and tapes this frequently and 14 percent reported listening to the radio this often.

This study found knowledge of some common rock lyrics quite lacking. Knowledge could also be conceptualized as an outcome of active listening. It is interesting to note here that so many attempts at pretesting and simplifying the knowledge items still led to a lack of recognition and recall of some extremely common words/phrases across the radio and television media, not to mention the millions of copies used on home stereos and tape players. Clearly, more depth interviewing of the knowledge of rock music is an important step in eventually testing whether knowlege of lyrics has any relationship to active, or "mindful" listening. It is also notable that in open-ended format, respondents indicated it is the music, not the lyrics, that they attend to and believe most important. Investigations are necessary into what about the music persons recall

and recognize, or if possibly the music might serve as a cue to people who paid attention to the lyrics but do not keep them as salient in their cognitive repertoire. Such cues may facilitate the retrieval of subconsciously processed lyrics.

The assumption that exposure over time to rock corrupts young people is also called into question by these results. The multivariate analysis suggests that neither exposure nor attention is a significant predictor of believing sex is enhanced by rock listening. Perhaps other, more situational or contextual motivational and information processing-like variables are important.

The finding that seeking rock music to bring out one's personality predicting the belief rock listening and sex go together well needs further exploration. It could be those individuals who generally find this music to socially facilitate them, in perhaps many ways, are more comfortable and at ease within the "culture" of the reception of rock and roll; therefore, they would expect sexual behavior to be enhanced with the music. Or, perhaps people who find rock music brings out their personality already have evidenced that sex goes better with rock and roll.

It could be rock music--the words, sound, or both--is a social catalyst for more inhibited, self-conscious individuals, who perhaps are high on communication apprehension. It would be useful to include personality measures, or more person-by-situation measures, of communication apprehension, self monitoring, and perhaps self esteem to determine if certain types of persons are more inclined to seek, or to find, this use from rock music.

Age and experiences with sex and other "adult" activities, some

possibly illegal like drug usage, are important. Younger persons, with less experience in sexual behavior may not hold positive attitudes toward combining two behaviors they have not engaged in (sex and listening to rock music), simply because they have not indulged.

For some final points on "active listening," as conceptualized here: it is important to note a single open-ended response to a pretest item. When a female respondent was asked what, if anything, is offensive about some lyrics from the rock group AC/DC, she wrote: "It's sick; everything is offensive. I never realized the words until they were set apart from the music."

It seems focusing on the lyrics, or their use, may not be the most appropriate way to examine alleged effects. In addition, claims of obscenity that do not take into account rhythm and beat when many young listeners have indicated the sound is more important than the words, are weak. It is conceivable that the words actually do not fall under the legal definition of "obscene," but the music may.

Even more importantly, implicit sexual (and other "dangerous") messages, concomitantly presented with sound, may be just as powerful. Proving harm from any one, or combination, of these would seem to have to take into account some form of active perception, attention and integration into the cognitive system.

Table 1. Bivariate Correlation Coefficients Between Critical Independent and Dependent Variables

Predictor Variables:	(Dependent Variables) Rock Music Enhances:		
	Sexual Encounters	Drugs/Alcohol	Gatherings
Gender	.02	-.01	.01
Age	.25***	.07	.06
Religiosity	.06	.00	.06
Records/tapes exposure	.10	.27**	-.05
Radio exposure	-.14	.01	.19*
Sex while listening	.37***	.24**	.05
Drugs while listening	.26**	.35***	.13
Alchohol while listening	-.03	.07	.20*
Escape gratification	.05	.06	.24**
Personality gratification	.16*	.19*	.08
Talk gratification	.12	.00	.03
Attend	.18*	.06	.02
Memorize lyrics	.01	.02	.10

***=p<.001
**=p<.01
*=p<.05

Gender is a dummy variable with 0=female, 1=male

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Analysis: Predictors of Believing Rock Music Enhances Sexual Encounters (Entries are standardized beta coefficients) (N=104)

Predictors:	Demo-graphics	+Exposure Variables	+Sex with Rock	+Bring Out Personality	+Active
Gender	.01	-.03	-.01	.00	.00
Age	.22*	.22*	.17*	.18*	.18*
Albums/tapes		.09	.03	.01	.01
Radio		-.12	-.13	-.13	-.13
Sex/Listen			.33***	.35***	.33***
Personality				.19*	.18*
Attend					-.02
Memorize					.09
R-square	.04	.07	.18	.21	.22
Inc R-square		.02	.11***	.04*	.01
Overall F	3.08	2.31	5.21***	5.45***	4.21***

***=p<.001
**=p<.01
*=p<.05

Gender is a dummy variable with 0=female, 1=male

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